

SECTION V: IMPLEMENTATION:

Implementation of this plan will require both interagency cooperation and public input. Agencies will need to coordinate monitoring of populations and habitat and research projects related to conservation of sage-grouse. Agencies and organizations, private companies, work groups or individuals that become involved in conservation planning and projects will need to assess funding towards those projects. This section provides an initial insight into projects that are currently being funded, who is managing the project and what conservation actions they entail. It provides a brief summary of state and federal programs that can be used to implement projects by organizations and individuals. It also lists current and future research projects and sage-grouse population and habitat monitoring projects.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Use habitat programs that are in place to manage rangelands and improve sagebrush habitat in North Dakota. These programs can help to:
 - a) improve and maintain existing sagebrush/steppe habitat;
 - b) restore sagebrush/steppe habitat to areas that have been converted to cropland/tame grass;
 - c) restore connectivity to existing habitat.
2. Provide for monitoring of:
 - a) strutting grounds to determine the sage-grouse population status on an annual basis;
 - b) the quality and trend of big sagebrush plant communities on a periodic basis.
3. Develop contracts with other agencies and universities that will cover needed research on sage-grouse in North Dakota.

AN ASSESSMENT OF SAGE-GROUSE/SAGEBRUSH CONSERVATION PROGRAMS:

North Dakota Game and Fish Department (NDGFD)

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department has several programs under the Private Lands Initiative (PLI) in place that have been adapted to work in the sagebrush/steppe area of southwestern North Dakota. These include: (1) the Landowner Incentive Program (LIP); (2) CRP Cost-sharing; (3) Working Lands; and (4) Habitat Plots.

Landowner Incentive Program (LIP)

LIP is a US Fish and Wildlife Service grant program to supplement North Dakota Game and Fish Department funds to protect and restore habitats on private lands to benefit at risk wildlife species. Landowners receive up front payments for 5, 10, 15 or 20 year agreements or other direct payments for habitat management, development and/or restoration of habitat. Examples of projects available in the sage-grouse sagebrush/steppe area of North Dakota include protecting existing sagebrush/steppe habitat, sage-grouse breeding, nesting and foraging sites (habitat); planting native vegetation such as grasses, forbs, shrubs (sagebrush); and promoting grazing systems beneficial to sage-grouse and livestock. The Department has approximately \$250,000 available during this grant cycle (2005-2007) for individual landowners.

Conservation Reserve Program Cost Sharing

This program offers cost-share funds to landowners for establishing cover on acres enrolled in the USDA Conservation Reserve Program. It provides assistance in establishing grass and shrub (sagebrush) cover on lands enrolled in the program. Up to 50% cost-share on seed costs will be provided and can be applied to new, established, or renovation seedings.

Two options are offered to landowners. They have a choice of: limited haying and grazing; or no haying or grazing. For limited haying/grazing, the landowner must obtain a modified CRP conservation plan from their Farm Services Agency (FSA) office. Under this option, the landowner may hay or graze up to 50% of the acreage, either under his 50% option, or an emergency haying/grazing declaration. Under the latter option (no haying or grazing allowed) an extra incentive payment will compensate for this non-use.

Working Lands

The Working Lands Program recognizes and rewards landowners for activities and resources that have a positive impact on wildlife habitat without requiring land retirement. Points are awarded to landowners who are willing to undertake a habitat development project that will benefit wildlife and use cropland and rangeland management systems that favor conservation. Payments range from \$.50 to \$3.00 per acre and the contract period is two years.

Habitat Plots

This can be either a short term or multi-year agreement providing nesting, wintering or other key wildlife habitat. This plot program can be newly established cover, existing cover, or a combination of both. Agreements in the short term option for newly established habitat run for six years while existing habitat agreements run for three years. Long term options run from ten to twenty years. During the term of the contract, landowners agree to not hay or graze the tracts. Long-term options cover both new and existing habitats.

New habitat: The Department will provide 50% cost-share (to \$30/acre) to establish new permanent vegetative cover (including sagebrush) on cropland, with seed mix depending on soil classification.

Existing habitat: Existing habitat can be enrolled along with converted cropland, and consists of habitat in place (grassland, sagebrush/steppe). Priority is given to areas greater than 80 acres in size. Payments are less than new habitat since no costs are involved in establishing new cover.

(Contact information for the NDGFD and these programs can be found in Attachment II)

United States Forest Service (USFS)

The High Plains Partnership (HPP)

The HPP mission is to establish and fully implement a public/private partnership, based on existing programs and organizations, to conserve and enrich the natural heritage of the High Plains region in cooperation with private landowners. The goals are to (1) improve the status of High Plains species-at-risk to reduce or remove their need for protection under authority of the ESA; and (2) improve the

economic viability of lands that are voluntarily managed for declining species in the High Plains by offering a diverse array of financial incentives.

The High Plains Partnership is a public/private initiative to proactively conserve declining habitats on private lands throughout the High Plains region. In keeping with the Secretary of the Interior's 4-C's philosophy of consultation, communication and cooperation in the service of conservation, the HPP is a joint effort between the USFWS Regions 2 and 6, 11 state wildlife agencies (AZ, CO, KS, MT, ND, NE, NM, OK, SD, TX, WY), USDA agencies, and numerous private conservation organizations (such as Wildlife Management Institute, National Wildlife Federation, The Nature Conservancy, Predator Conservation Alliance). The HPP initiative seeks to increase grassland project funding for all collaborators while providing on-the-ground technical support and financial assistance. (Contact information for the USFS and this program can be found in Attachment II)

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

The NRCS can provide technical and financial assistance to landowners for development of conservation plans that include rangeland management practices. Various programs are available to provide financial assistance to apply these practices. Programs exist that are meant to facilitate grazing and range improvements as well as programs that will facilitate establishment of these practices.

Grazing and Range Improvement Programs

Conservation Practices (CP)

NRCS has various conservation practices that can be used to benefit sage-grouse habitat. Conservation practices can assist landowners in the development of a grazing system that is beneficial to sage-grouse, big sagebrush habitat and is economically viable.

Prescribed Grazing (528)

The 528 programs, or the Prescribed Grazing Program can be used to develop a grazing system to improve or maintain quantity and quality of food and/or cover available for wildlife while improving or maintaining quality forage for livestock health and productivity.

Restoration and Management of Declining Habitats (643)

This program is defined as projects for restoring and conserving rare or declining native vegetated communities and associated wildlife species. The purpose is to restore land degraded by human activity; provide habitat for rare and declining wildlife species by restoring and conserving native plant communities; increase native plant community diversity; and management of unique or declining native habitats. This practice will apply on any landscape which once supported or currently supports the habitat to be restored or managed, including the sagebrush/steppe in Bowman and Slope counties. This program will aid in revegetation by planting clumps of big sagebrush with revegetation programs involving native grass and forb species. Management of these lands will then be according to conservation practice standard – Prescribed Grazing (528).

Cost Sharing Programs to Facilitate Grazing and Range Improvements

Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)

This program is a voluntary conservation program that provides technical, financial, and educational assistance to farmers and ranchers who face threats to soil, water, air, and related natural resources on their land. It serves to address serious natural resource concerns by developing conservation systems for treatment of these problems. Through EQIP the agency can provide technical and financial assistance in installation of prescribed grazing systems to improve sagebrush habitat. Cost sharing is available for facilitating practices such as fencing and watering systems for better livestock distribution, grass seeding, and crop residue management. The objective is to optimize environmental benefits, achieved through a process that begins with the definition of National priorities, which includes promotion of at-risk species habitat conservation.

Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)

Conservation Innovation Grants is a voluntary program intended to stimulate development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies while leveraging Federal investment in environmental enhancement and protection in conjunction with agricultural production.

Under CIG, funds from the EQIP program are used to award competitive grants to non-Federal governmental or private organizations, tribes or individuals. CIG enables NRCS to work with other public and private entities to educate and implement promising technologies and approaches that address pressing natural resource concerns. The program helps agricultural producers by providing more options for environmental enhancement projects and to help them comply with Federal, State and local regulations.

Grassland Reserve Program

This is a voluntary program that helps landowners and operators restore and conserve grassland, including rangeland, pastureland, and certain other lands, while maintaining the areas as grazing land. The program emphasizes support for grazing operations, plant and animal biodiversity, and grassland and land containing shrubs and forbs under the greatest threat of conversion.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

This is a voluntary program that encourages creation of high quality wildlife habitat that supports wildlife populations of significance. It provides technical and financial assistance to landowners and others to develop upland habitat areas on their property. Most efforts to date have been to improve upland wildlife habitat on range land.

(Contact information for the NRCS and these programs can be found in Attachment II)

Farm Service Agency (FSA)

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

FSA has approved a Wildlife Priority Zone which incorporates the area of North Dakota that has sage brush habitat. This designation makes more cropland in the area eligible for CRP and provides general sign-up applications with additional scoring in the ranking process.

(Contact information for the FSA can be found in Attachment II)

MONITORING:

North Dakota Game and Fish Department

The NDGFD will continue in the lead roll of obtaining population data on sage-grouse. Data collected will be an annual spring census of sage-grouse on all known strutting ground sites (active and inactive), hunter success and harvest data, and population data from wing samples collected during fall hunting seasons. Monitoring of some big sagebrush plant communities will also be conducted to gauge success of state sponsored management practices that are beneficial to sage-grouse habitat.

NDGFD will work with the federal land managing agencies in the state to develop a monitoring program on sagebrush communities within sage-grouse habitat under federal management. The agency will also serve as a technical advisor to organizations, private corporations or individuals interested in implementing and monitoring habitat conservation practices on private property that will benefit sage-grouse.

RESEARCH NEEDS:

Contracts have been awarded to South Dakota State University to conduct research on sage-grouse in North Dakota. A Master's degree (Attachment III, Project Narrative I) began in March, 2005 and will continue through June, 2007. A PhD study has been developed, a student chosen, and work will begin in late summer or fall, 2005 (Attachment III, Project Narrative II). Additional research will be conducted as deemed necessary at the conclusion of these studies.